

An apparently isolated population of Blue-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon malimbica* in Ethiopia

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The most interesting records of Blue-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon malimbica* in Ethiopia (de Castro & de Castro 1990) would seem, in the absence of details of identification and because they were apparently remote from any other records, to be inherently unlikely.

Through the courtesy of G. C. Backhurst the de Castros (*in litt.*) kindly provided details of identification for the birds seen by them, as well as a colour photograph of one bird, along the Legedema River and Didessa River in Wolega Province, Ethiopia, in January, February and May 1989 (the observers were not in the area in March and April). They again saw the birds in the same area in October 1989, when there was also another not far away along the Didessa River. The photograph shows the blue breast band having a similar intensity of blue as the back of the neck, the black eye-streak extending well behind the eye, and the black of the wing coverts extending over the scapulars. The identification cannot be in doubt.

This species is largely sedentary (Fry *et al.* 1988) and the only evidence for movement anywhere in Africa is provided by Elgood (1982), who states that records in north Nigeria are in the rains (implying that they are not there at other times). The de Castros' records are prior to the rains in Ethiopia, which perhaps suggests that their birds did not arrive at this site from their far-away known range of distribution. In Uganda the species is not uncommon in the west and south and to the east as far as the Sezibwa River (Britton 1980); in the Sudan it is only recorded from four localities in the south and southwest along the Zaïre border (Nikolaus 1989). The nearest known localities to the Ethiopian site are *c.* 650 km away in the Sudan and *c.* 900 km away in Uganda.

My own observations from further north in forest along the Didessa River at 9°03N, 36°08E near where the Lekempt–Ghimbi road crosses the ravine, provide evidence for two further records, previously overlooked, of *H. malimbica*. This area was visited for a total of 98 days between 10 March 1970 and 16 July 1975 (20 days in January, 40 in February, 12 in March, 9 in June and 17 in July), in the course of an investigation of wild vertebrates as potential arbovirus reservoir hosts. *Halcyon* kingfishers, identified at the time as *senegalensis*, were seen rarely: 1–2 daily on 10–12 March 1970, and singly on 8 July 1971 and 21 February 1974. A small amount of blood for a serum sample was removed from each of the two captured birds on 13 March 1970 and 8 July 1971 before they were measured, ringed and released (Table 1). Both of these were retrospectively identified as *H. malimbica*.

Table 1. *Details of two Halcyon malimbica from the Didessa valley, Ethiopia*

Date	time	wing moult	wing (mm)	weight (g)	reference
13.03.70	08:30	nil	112	77.9	2067
08.07.71	14:30	nil	119	71.4	18973

They were entered on my schedules as *H. senegalensis*, and although both their long wing-lengths and heavy weights were noted, the possibility of *H. malimbica*, with which I was unfamiliar, was not considered at the time.

Table 2. *Weights and wing-lengths of Halcyon malimbica and senegalensis*

Species and region	weights (g)			wing-lengths (mm)			authority
	mean	range	<i>n</i>	mean	range	<i>n</i>	
<i>H. s. senegalensis</i> Ethiopia	49.9	36.6–64.5	191	105	100–105	193	Ash
<i>H. s. senegalensis</i> East Africa	54.3	41–64	24	105	98–113	153	Fry <i>et al.</i> 1988
<i>H. s. cyanoleuca</i> Malawi	62.7	56–76	19	112	105–120	123	Fry <i>et al.</i> 1988
<i>H. m. malimbica</i> Ethiopia		71.4, 77.9	2		112, 119	2	Ash
<i>H. m. malimbica</i> Uganda	83	66–94	42	115	110–123	43	Fry <i>et al.</i> 1988

Table 2 shows that the measurements of the wing-lengths and weights of the two captured Didessa birds are above those for a large sample of Ethiopian *H. s. senegalensis* which I handled in other parts of the country. The measurements do, however, fall within the ranges of the parameters for *H. malimbica* given by Fry *et al.* (1988). It is noteworthy that I have only four weights for nominate *senegalensis* above 60 g, which are in the range of 61.1–64.5 g.

There is a larger southern race of *H. senegalensis*, *H. s. cyanoleuca*, which is more likely to be confused with *malimbica*, particularly as it moves north in the non-breeding season. One specimens of *cyanoleuca* has been obtained on the River Baro in southern Sudan (Fry *et al.* 1988) close to the Ethiopian border, and some 300 km to the west of the Didessa localities for *H. malimbica*. *H. s. cyanoleuca* is as distinct as is *H. s. senegalensis* from *malimbica* on plumage, but there is an overlap in wing-length. The two Didessa *malimbica* wing-lengths at 112 and 119 mm fall within the range given for *H. s. cyanoleuca*, but the heavier bird at 77.9 g is heavier than any *cyanoleuca* in Table 2 (range 56–76 g).

The evidence provided above indicates that the birds in 1970 and 1971 were, without reasonable doubt, records of *H. malimbica*. It now remains to establish the distribution and racial status of this isolated population on the edge of this almost ornithologically unknown forested area of Ethiopia, where it may even largely replace *senegalensis*.

The species has now been recorded in all the months except for June in which the area has been visited by the de Castros and me, namely January–March, May–July and October. However, these more recent records of *H. malimbica* in Ethiopia are pre-dated by an earlier one first noted in an apparently unpublished typed report of the Italian Game Department in Ethiopia in 1941. It lists a male "*Halcyon malimbicus* [*sic*]

subsp.?" on 8 March 1939 collected at Handac (*regione*) in the valley of the Didessa River to the west of Lechemti (= Lekempt), with a note "*Primo rinvenimento ad oriente ad Nilo bianco?*" (First discovery east of the White Nile?). The record is published by Toschi (1959) as *Halcyon malimbicus prenticei*¹ Mearns on 18 (*sic*) March 1939 at Handac (Leckemti), as the first record from Ethiopia. The determinations of birds in this collection were made by Toschi personally, and he obviously took enough care to identify this bird subspecifically. He also identified *H. senegalensis* in the same collection, so there seems to be no reason to doubt the validity of this record. Moltoni & Ruscone (1940) were presumably unaware of it when they completed *Gli uccelli dell'Africa orientale Italiana* in October 1939, for the species is not mentioned in that work. Similarly, it is not mentioned in the Ethiopian check-list (Urban & Brown 1970). I have been able to place the Handac region between the Didessa and Angar valleys, and as the former is mentioned specifically it cannot be far from the site of the 1970 and 1971 records.

Subsequently, an expedition from the Paris Museum collected in the Handac area in c. 1970, and the Smithsonian Institution collected in the upper Didessa valley further south between Dembi and Agaro in 1971 (Desfayes 1975), but neither recorded *H. malimbica*. Otherwise the records are few in relation to the amount of time spent in the area, so that the species may be somewhat rare.

Professor C.H. Fry accepted the recent records of *malimbica* in Ethiopia for inclusion in a book on kingfishers and related birds (Fry *et al.* in press). The Italian record had not been traced at the time of this decision.

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¹*H. m. prenticei* is regarded as synonymous with nominate *malimbica* by White (1965)

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